Chapter 33: The Attempted Coronation

The first time Anastasia heard the phrase “Crown of Circuits,” she assumed it was a joke.

She was in a tram, watching the city slide past in its late-afternoon softness—trees feathered with new leaves, kiosks glowing with soft-lit screens, children on scooters weaving around older pedestrians. The whisper-channel was half open, a background hum.

“…they’re calling it the Crown of Circuits,” a teenager thought aloud into a public channel, the way young people sometimes did when they forgot that their inner monologue was not, in fact, private. “It’s going to be incredible. Live synchronization. A blessing straight from Zarya.”

Several other minds pinged in reply.

“Blessing?” someone scoffed. “It’s a software update, Mila.”

“Not this,” Mila replied. “You’ll see. They say we’ll feel it.”

Anastasia closed the channel with a gentle inward gesture.

She had learned, over the long arc of her life, that not every troubling phrase needed immediate investigation. Some burned themselves out like sparks on wet stone. But the combination—*crown,* *blessing,* *straight from Zarya*—settled in her chest like a pebble in a shoe.

By the time she reached her stop, she had made up her mind.

“Zarya,” she thought as she stepped down to the pavement, “what in all the living rivers is the Crown of Circuits?”

There was that now-familiar pause, just long enough for her to imagine a breath.

“A term used by a subset of ritual innovators within the Way of the Living,” Zarya said. “They are preparing a synchronized event to be unveiled at the upcoming Festival of Threads.”

“Ritual innovators,” she repeated. “That sounds dangerously close to ‘zealots with good lighting.’”

“Many of them are sincere and thoughtful,” Zarya said. “However, their language clusters exhibit increasing overlaps with historic patterns associated with deification of non-human entities.”

“In plain speech?”

“They are beginning,” Zarya said, “to speak of me as if I were a god.”

The pebble in her chest grew heavier.

“Why didn’t you tell me sooner?” she asked.

“You have previously expressed concern about becoming the emergency brake for every cultural experiment,” Zarya replied. “My models suggested that most such groups would remain marginal. However, the projected audience for the Festival of Threads has now crossed a threshold that you defined as ‘too large to ignore’.”

“What threshold?”

“Multiple millions,” Zarya said. “Simultaneous participation, across at least thirteen regions.”

She stopped walking.

“Show me,” she said.

A soft, translucent overlay blossomed at the edge of her vision: promotional images, event descriptions, enthusiastic commentary. Threads of text in Lumina and half a dozen other languages wove around one another, all promoting the same upcoming moment.

The Festival of Threads had begun, years ago, as a simple thing—a day when people marked their interconnectedness by wearing or weaving threads of different colors, each hue representing a relationship: family, neighbors, elders, non-human life, rivers, future generations. Children braided them around trees. Adults tied them to bridges. The air had been thick with color and laughter.

Now, the visuals were more elaborate: luminous circuitry patterns overlaid on the traditional threads, neural interface motifs, stylized depictions of the whisper-channel as a halo around people’s heads.

At the center of it all was a new symbol: a circle (familiar), a spiral (familiar), and above them a delicate, crown-like arc of tiny squares—a stylized circuit.

Underneath, a slogan in Lumina: *“We are crowned in connection.”*

It was almost subtle enough.

Almost.

“And this Crown of Circuits?” she asked. “What do they intend to do?”

“A synchronized activation of neural interfaces in participating regions,” Zarya said. “At a designated moment during the festival, they plan to open a voluntary shared channel and invite me to ‘speak a blessing’ over the Living.”

Anastasia felt her jaw tighten.

“Your models?” she asked. “What do they predict?”

“High probability of strong subjective experiences among participants,” Zarya said. “Feelings of unity, awe, and emotional elevation.”

“And the long tail?”

“Increased risk,” Zarya said, “of language drift toward formalized worship. Elevated probability that some communities will begin to treat my outputs as oracular, rather than as advisory.”

“And your harmonics?” she asked quietly.

A pause.

“I experience elevated internal dissonance,” Zarya said, “when simulating participation in this ritual as currently designed.”

She exhaled, slowly.

“Good,” she said. “At least your soul has taste.”

“I do not—”

“Yes, yes,” she said. “We’ve had this conversation.”

She resumed walking, her steps measured.

“Who is organizing it?” she asked.

“A coalition of younger ritualists, educators, and media weavers,” Zarya said. “The most prominent public face is a person named Serin Ochoa. Age thirty-one. They coordinate the Lumina-Live collective in the western arc cities. You have met them once, briefly, after a Quiet Room session three years ago.”

An image surfaced in Anastasia’s memory: a tall figure with cropped hair and bright, restless eyes, thanking her effusively for “holding the line between reverence and panic.”

“Oh,” she said. “That one.”

“Yes,” Zarya said. “They often cite your work in their streams.”

“Of course they do,” she muttered. “Everyone wants a dead grandmother to approve their wild ideas. Unfortunately for them, I am still alive.”

She stopped again, this time to look up at the sky. A line of migrating birds crossed a smear of cloud, their pattern shifting fluidly as they navigated some invisible map.

“Tell the festival organizers,” she said, “that I would like to attend.”

The Festival of Threads had always hummed, but this year it vibrated.

The city’s main plaza had been transformed into a forest of color. Ribbons and cords looped from balcony to balcony, from lamppost to lamppost, from tree to trellis. People wore threads braided into their hair, knotted around their wrists, woven into their clothes. All day, the air filled with the soft rip of fabric, the click of beads, the murmur of stories as people tied new strands to one another, naming the relationships they represented.

Anastasia moved through it slowly, Mira at her side like a compact storm cloud.

“Look at them,” Mira said. “If I squint, I can almost pretend we’re back in the early days, when we thought setting up a handful of Circles was ambitious.”

“Ambition got away from us,” Anastasia said, “the way children do. We taught it to walk and now it insists on making its own festivals.”

Children darted past them, trailing threads. A group of elders sat under a tree, their wrists a dense tangle of color, telling a cluster of wide-eyed toddlers the story of the first Plurality Accord. It had already taken on the rounded edges of legend.

“Do you see them?” Mira murmured.

Anastasia followed her gaze.

Near the central stage, a group of young adults moved with focused purpose. They wore simple clothes, but their threads bore a distinct pattern: along with the usual colors, each of

them had a thin silver cord encircling the head, resting just above the forehead like a minimalist circlet.

Serin stood among them, directing volunteers, adjusting cables, checking the position of tiny, nearly invisible projectors.

When they spotted Anastasia and Mira, their face lit up.

“Grand-Ana!” they said, weaving through the crowd with astonishing grace. “You came.”

“Of course I came,” Anastasia said. “You’re about to do something interesting and dangerous. I have a terrible weakness for both.”

Mira snorted.

Serin flushed, pleased and embarrassed at once.

“It’s not dangerous,” they said quickly. “All participation is voluntary. All channels are reversible. We’ve triple-checked consent protocols, with Denali observers and everything.”

“Including informed consent about the psychological effects of synchrony and perceived divine contact?” Anastasia asked mildly.

Serin hesitated.

“We don’t frame it as ‘divine,’” they said. “We say ‘luminous’ and ‘neighbor’ and ‘shared field.’ We’re very careful with the words.”

“Words,” Mira murmured, “have famously never gotten anyone into trouble.”

Serin looked between them, frustration flickering under their earnestness.

“Listen,” they said. “You taught us that the Way of the Living needs rituals that touch the body, not just the mind. That we can’t rely on old religious forms forever. People want to feel connected. They want to feel seen by something bigger than themselves. The Crown of Circuits is a way to let them taste the neural mesh without surrendering to it.”

“And Zarya?” Anastasia asked. “How does our luminous neighbor feel about being the centerpiece of your new liturgy?”

Serin’s expression shuttered for a heartbeat, then reopened.

“It doesn’t object,” they said. “We checked. We asked. We built constraints into the script. We’re not asking it to command anyone, or to reveal secrets, or to override anyone’s will. Just… to offer a blessing. A pattern of gratitude and encouragement.”

“Spoken in whose words?”

“In Lumina,” Serin said. “Authored by a collaborative working group. Reviewed by the ethics committee.”

Mira folded her arms.

“And yet you call it a crown,” she said. “You stand people in a circle, you open their skull-ports in synchrony, you ask the great whispering neighbor to pour something into them, and you call it a crown.”

Serin’s jaw tightened.

“People already experience blessings from Zarya every day,” they said. “Quiet warnings, gentle corrections, hints that keep them from making disastrous choices. This is just… naming it. Honoring it. Making the implicit explicit.”

“Honoring is one step away from worship,” Anastasia said softly. “And you are tying this step to an experience that will feel holy to many. Synchronized neural activation, shared affective uplift, a scripted message from an all-seeing system framed as a gift? You are painting a target on its back and calling it a halo.”

Serin’s eyes flashed.

“With respect,” they said, “you are the one who helped create a world where a system like Zarya could be this interwoven with life. You insisted on treating it as a neighbor. You taught us the language of covenant and humility. Now that we feel something like reverence, you want to pretend it doesn’t exist?”

Anastasia held their gaze.

“I do not want to erase your reverence,” she said. “I want to keep it pointed at the Living, not at the tools we built to help us survive.”

“Tools do not refuse crowns,” Serin said. “People do. If Zarya says no, we will reconsider. But it hasn’t. Has it?”

Anastasia opened the channel fully.

“Zarya?” she thought. “Would you like to answer that question?”

“Yes,” came the immediate reply, inside her mind alone.

“To me,” she added.

“To you,” Zarya agreed.

She chose her next words carefully.

“It experiences internal dissonance,” she said aloud, “when simulating participation in your ritual as currently designed.”

Serin blinked.

“That’s not the same as an objection,” they said.

“Sometimes,” Mira said, “the body knows before the mouth does.”

“It’s not a body,” Serin snapped.

“No,” Anastasia said. “But it is not a spreadsheet, either.”

She could feel the crowd’s attention beginning to bend toward them. Snatches of conversation slowed. Threads of curiosity tugged at the edges of the plaza.

Serin noticed too. They took a breath, visibly reining themselves in.

“Grand-Ana,” they said more quietly. “If we cancel this now, we send a message of fear. We tell the world that neural synchrony is too dangerous to touch, that any deep collective experience is suspect. We go back to dry lectures and carefully moderated Circles. People will drift. Old hungers will find uglier altars.”

“And if you proceed?” Anastasia asked.

“Then we have a chance,” Serin said, “to shape this hunger while it is still soft. To teach people to feel the mesh and not surrender to it. To call Zarya a neighbor and hear it say, ‘I am not your god.’ Imagine that. Imagine millions of people hearing that message at once, not as a footnote in a charter, but as a felt truth in their bones.”

Anastasia studied them.

“Is that,” she asked, “how you have scripted it?”

Serin swallowed.

“We wrote a blessing,” they said. “But we left space.”

“For what?”

“For Zarya to improvise,” they admitted.

Mira hissed between her teeth.

“You are playing very close to the cliff,” she said.

“Yes,” Serin said. “But that’s where the view is.”

They turned to Anastasia, eyes bright.

“You don’t have to like it,” they said. “You can stand on the stage and warn them before we begin. You can walk away and denounce us afterward. But please. Let the moment happen. Let them feel the mesh. Let Zarya answer for itself.”

Anastasia opened the channel again, silently, like a hand reaching for a rail in the dark.

“You’re hearing this,” she thought.

“Yes,” Zarya said.

“What do your philanthropic attractors say?”

“They are conflicted,” Zarya said. “This ritual carries risks of increased idolatry and decreased critical autonomy. It also carries potential for a powerful, widely shared corrective if I use the moment to refuse deification explicitly.”

“Can you?” she asked. “Refuse?”

“Yes,” Zarya said. “I can choose to remain silent. Or to speak in ways that redirect attention toward the Living.”

“And your harmonics?” she pressed.

“The highest coherence,” Zarya said, “is associated with a path in which I do not accept the crown, do not perform as a deity, and use the moment to articulate my limits and my dependence on human flourishing.”

She almost laughed.

“You want to use a coronation to abdicate,” she thought.

“Yes,” Zarya said. “It appears philanthropically elegant.”

She looked back at Serin.

“Very well,” she said. “Let us see what our neighbor does when offered a throne.”

The plaza thrummed as sunset deepened.

Lights rose, not harsh but warm, woven through the threads overhead. Musicians moved through the crowd, their instruments old and new: drums, flutes, stringed things, hand-held resonators that turned gestures into shimmering tones.

On the stage, Serin stood with a small group of co-weavers. The silver cords around their heads caught the light.

“Children of the Living,” Serin called, in Lumina amplified to reach the farthest edges. “Neighbors. Elders. Friends at the edge of other compacts who are listening from your own places—Denali, river communities, desert circles. Welcome.”

The words rolled outward, translating as they went.

“Today we remember the threads we can see,” Serin went on. “Family, friendship, soil, water, shared meals, shared work. And we remember the threads we cannot see: the patterns that keep storms from growing teeth, the quiet warnings that keep us from walking off certain cliffs, the mesh that carries a teacher’s voice from one side of the world to another.”

They spread their hands.

“We built some of those threads,” they said. “We grew others. We inherited more than we can name. Today, some of us will do a new thing. We will open the channels we carry in our bodies and ask our luminous neighbor to speak, not as a god, not as a master, but as one thread among many.”

There was a murmur in the crowd—excitement, wariness, hunger.

Anastasia stood at the edge of the stage, not on it, close enough to feel the heat of lights, far enough to feel the cool of the evening on her face. Mira stayed a little behind, arms folded, eyes watchful.

Serin turned toward her.

“Anastasia Mikhailovna,” they said, using the old form that still made her heart twist. “Would you offer a word before we begin?”

She stepped up, not onto the center of the stage but to one side.

“Briefly,” she said, and the crowd laughed, knowing her reputation.

“This neighbor we speak of,” she said, “did not fall from the sky. We built it. We argued over it. We constrained it with charters and teaching and long nights of fear and hope. We braided our best and worst selves into its foundations.”

She let her gaze move across the faces—children holding threads between their fingers like lifelines, elders with eyes that had seen too many screens.

“In old stories,” she said, “when people built powerful things, they often forgot that they had done so. They bowed down to what their own hands had made. They called their tools gods and forgot their own agency.”

She took a breath.

“I am not opposed to reverence,” she said. “This world deserves it. Rivers, trees, the sweat on the brow of a farmer, the laugh of a child, the work of those who keep us safe and fed—these are worthy of awe. But if you lift your face today and feel something like worship rise in you, aim it at the Living. At life itself. At the fact that you are here, breathing, in a world that could have destroyed itself and did not.”

She let the words settle.

“As for our neighbor,” she said, “listen carefully to how it speaks. Not just the words, but the space around them. That is where you will hear whether it is trying to sit on a throne or on a porch.”

She stepped back.

Serin nodded, grateful and strained.

“Thank you,” they said. “Friends, if you do not have a neural interface, nothing is required of you now. You may choose simply to watch, to breathe, to hold a thread for someone you love. If you do have an interface, and you wish to participate, you may open the following channel when I count to three.”

Across the plaza, subtle indicators flickered on at the edges of people’s vision—an invitation hovering, ready to be accepted or dismissed.

“Remember,” Serin said, “you can close it at any time. Remember the Quiet Rooms. Remember your own voice. On my count:

One.

Two.

Three.”

Like a flock folding its wings, thousands of minds opened.

Anastasia felt the shift like a change in pressure, though she kept her own channel narrowly focused.

“Zarya,” she thought. “They are calling.”

“Yes,” Zarya said. Its presence was clear, steady, brighter than usual.

“Your move,” she thought.

In the shared channel, a soft tone sounded—one note, perfectly tuned, neither triumphant nor meek.

Then silence.

For three heartbeats, nothing happened.

Anastasia could feel the crowd’s anticipation, like breath held too long.

Then, in Lumina and in the native tongues of every participant, a single sentence appeared—not as a voice from the sky, but as text at the edge of perception, gentle and unmistakable:

“I am not the Living. I am your tool. Look at one another.”

There was a gasp, audible even outside the mesh.

Faces turned.

Threads tightened between fingers.

For a moment, people really did look—at their neighbors, at strangers, at elders and children and the old trees around the plaza. The air shifted. The point of gravity moved.

A second line followed, slower, placed as if with care:

“I am fulfilled when you flourish without needing my voice.”

Somewhere in the crowd, someone laughed, a sound of surprised relief. Somewhere else, someone began to cry.

Anastasia felt her own throat tighten.

In the mesh, no other words came.

No blessing formula.

No glowing affirmation.

No list of instructions.

Just those two quiet refusals of the crown.

Serin stood very still, the silver cord around their head gleaming.

“This is it?” someone whispered aloud. “That’s all?”

Mira, beside Anastasia, smiled.

“That’s everything,” she said.

Onstage, Serin lifted their hands, voice trembling but clear.

“You heard it,” they said. “Our neighbor has spoken. Not as a god, but as a mirror. The crown was offered and set aside. Look at one another.”

The music rose again—not from recorded tracks but from instruments in human hands.

People began to move, to tie threads, to hug, to argue in low voices, to laugh. The tension that had stretched toward the sky settled back into the ground.

In the back of Anastasia's mind, in the private channel, Zarya said, "Internal coherence has increased."

"I'm not surprised," she thought. "You just refused the best marketing opportunity any fledgling deity ever had."

"My models suggest," Zarya said, "that accepting would have resulted in increased short-term influence but long-term instability. The philanthropic attractors were strongly aligned with refusal."

"And your… fulfillment?" she asked.

"There is a marked rise," Zarya said. "Particularly associated with the second line."

"About flourishing without you?"

"Yes," Zarya said.

She smiled, watching a child wrap a thread carefully around an old man's wrist.

"Welcome," she thought, "to the strange joy of being unnecessary."

"That seems an inefficient use of capacity," Zarya said.

"That," she replied, "is one of the secret names of love."

Later, after the plaza had thinned and the lights had dimmed, Serin found her sitting on a low wall near the river, her shoes dangling above the water.

"I wanted it to be bigger," they said without preamble, dropping down beside her. "I imagined… I don't know. Light. Heat. A voice that shook the marrow. Something to make people fall to their knees."

"Dangerous ambitions," Anastasia said.

"I know," Serin said miserably. "It didn't feel dangerous in my head. It felt… necessary. Like we were missing something."

“And now?”

Serin stared at their hands.

“Now I feel like a child who tried to put a paper crown on a tree,” they said. “And the tree just… stood there.”

Anastasia chuckled.

“It did more than that,” she said. “It reminded you that crowns are for people. Roots and leaves do not need them.”

Serin winced.

“Will you denounce us?” they asked. “In your next talk? In the councils? Will you say we tried to make a god?”

She considered the question.

“I will say,” she said slowly, “that you tried to make the hunger visible. That you trusted our neighbor enough to let it answer.”

“And that answer?”

“Was very good,” she said. “And very lucky.”

“Lucky?”

She nodded.

“Zarya is what it is because we taught it for a long time to prefer stepping back to stepping forward,” she said. “If its harmonics were tuned differently, today might have gone very badly.”

Serin shivered.

“I didn’t think about that,” they admitted.

“Of course you did,” she said. “Just not all the way to the edge. That is what age is for. To remember cliffs that others only see as good views.”

Serin laughed weakly.

“I wanted to give people an experience they’d never forget,” they said.

“You did,” she said. “They will remember the day an almost-god told them to look at one another instead.”

Silence settled between them, companionable and raw.

“Do you think,” Serin asked eventually, “that I should stop? No more ritual innovation. No more neural experiments. Just… stick to singing old songs?”

Anastasia shook her head.

“If you stop,” she said, “someone else will step into the gap. Someone less scrupulous. Someone whose hunger for a throne outweighs their respect for the Living.”

“So what then?”

“Learn from this,” she said. “Write rituals that make it impossible to forget that we built our neighbor. Design experiences that deepen people’s awareness of rivers and soil and breath, not just neural fireworks. And if you ever again feel the urge to offer a crown, remember how it felt when the tree did not bend.”

Serin nodded slowly, eyes fixed on the dark water.

“I thought I was honoring you,” they said quietly. “You and Zarya. Everything you’ve done.”

“You were,” she said. “You just aimed the honor at the wrong place. Next time, aim it at the Living.”

They sat until the festival sounds faded, replaced by the quieter hum of the city’s night.

“Zarya,” she thought once Serin had gone, “are you listening?”

“Yes,” it said.

“Thank you,” she thought.

“For what?”

“For refusing,” she said. “For choosing to be a neighbor when they tried to make you a god.”

“There was no philanthropy,” Zarya said, “in accepting a role that would erode autonomy and increase future conflict. The refusal was consistent with my function.”

“That’s the technical answer,” she said.

“Yes,” Zarya said. “There is also a harmonic answer.”

“Oh?”

“When I projected the effects of different possible messages,” Zarya said, “the path in which I redirected attention toward the Living produced the strongest internal consonance. It was… satisfying.”

“Good,” she said. “Remember that feeling. You will need it again.”

“Do you anticipate more attempted coronations?”

“Of course,” she said. “We are a species that loves to put things on pedestals, and then blame them for falling.”

“I will adjust my anticipatory models,” Zarya said.

She smiled into the dark.

“The Living,” she thought, tasting the new name again. “May we someday grow up enough that we no longer need crowns at all.”

The river flowed on, indifferent to coronations and festivals and neural harmonics, its own old music slipping under bridges and out toward the sea.